

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine



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BOMB #14

by Jack Ritchie

Lightning only strikes once—so I was informed years and years ago by a lightning-rod salesman. That matches aren't to be played with—if memory serves me correctly—was something told me by my mother when I was a child, and shortly after I had playfully attempted to burn to the ground the very satisfactory house in which we were then living. To this store of man's wisdom, our story makes its contribution: Bombs may prove a shattering experience. And they have also been known to disrupt associations of long standing.

BOMB #14

THE BIG SQUARE package was alone in an island of space near the baggage windows. It was number fourteen in the last six years and we were supposed to see that it didn't kill anybody.

Pete and I studied the faces of the crowd behind the ropes. That was part of our job—to see if maybe somebody was licking his lips a little wetter than anybody else.

Pete chewed on his cigar. "I see the same eager types every time we're waiting for an idiot to jump out of a twentieth story window. Bet half the city knows about this by now."

The ropes kept the curious ones forty yards away from the box. I thought it should have been more than forty, but I wasn't running that part of the show.

A detail of men finished laying the twelve-by-two planks on the concrete steps and the bomb disposal truck drove up the improvised ramp and into the terminal's big lobby. It was an unwieldy vehicle, a thing of steel mesh and wickerwork with high sides that would divert the force of an explosion upwards where it would do the least harm.

The truck stopped within fifteen feet of the box before O'Brien and Hastings climbed out of the cab.

Pete stepped on his cigar. "The main event," he said and walked over to them. I hesitated a few moments and then followed, keeping the truck between me and the box.

O'Brien grinned. "They're setting up cameras. I'll have to remember my right profile's my fortune."

Pete helped him strap on the front harness. "I admire these hero boys. They're devil-may-care all right. And cute too."

O'Brien stepped closer to the box.

"Hold it," I said quickly. "If nobody's got any objections, I think Pete and I'll take our bodies a little farther away from here first."

We went back to our station behind one of the big marble pillars.

One of the patrolmen left the ropes and joined us. He talked close to our ears. "That guy with the light hair and tan jacket over there near the candy stand. I'll swear I saw him in the crowd at the library last week."

We looked at the faces behind the line and found him. He was a small man with a light complexion. His bright eyes had no attention for anything but what was going to happen near the truck.

Pete started to move, but I touched his arm. "He can wait a minute."

O'Brien and Hastings were alone on their stage. They went to the truck and got the long pole with the steel mesh basket.

The emptiness of silence took over as O'Brien bent over the package. He looked up for a moment and I thought I saw a grin through his mask. Then he put both hands gently on the package and began to lift it.

The explosion was a giant's roar that echoed and re-echoed through the big terminal.

I heard Pete curse. And when I stepped from behind the pillar, O'Brien and Hastings were two

costumed dolls that lay twisted grotesquely on the marble floor.

I bulled my way through the screaming crowd and got to the little man. He didn't know I was there. Not even when I put a hand around his thin arm.

He was still in his own world. His protruding eyes were on the two broken men on the floor and he smiled.

Captain Wilson moved his ash tray back and forth a few times before he looked up. "Hastings died right away. O'Brien's still hanging on, but if he makes it, he'll be retired for life."

He picked up the report sheet. "The suspect's name is Irwin James Stuart, 1368 98th St. I left him for you two to work on, considering that you picked him up."

Wilson rubbed the back of his neck. "Stuart is thirty-six, a bachelor, and living with his mother. She thinks we're beasts. Her boy never did anything wrong in his life. He's a good son and he never forgets Mother's Day."

He rummaged through the papers on his desk top until he found the slip he wanted. "We went through Stuart's house. Four lead pipes, ten cap-pings, the works of three cheap wrist watches and a small keg of powder. It's the kind of powder you use when you go in for reloading your own cartridges. But Stuart doesn't own a gun and there aren't any cartridges in the place."

Wilson got up and moved about restlessly. "We also found a scrapbook of newspaper clippings. It covers all the bombs, all the way back to the first one."

There were deep lines in his face. "Besides the big damage, three people got hit by fragments. Nothing serious, but they're probably talking to their lawyers now. Five more got trampled, some in the rush for the exits, and I guess we'll hear from them too."

I tapped a cigarette from my pack. "Somebody should have seen the box put there."

Wilson shrugged. "Fifty thousand or more people go through that terminal every day. Stuart must have counted on that." He exhaled a tired breath. "We got seven witnesses and seven descriptions. Five claim it was a man and two that it was a woman."

Pete thought it over. "Did they get a look at Stuart yet?"

Wilson's laugh was short. "Three identified him, including one who was sure it was a woman. Any good lawyer could tear them apart on the witness stand."

He looked at us. "A confession would be a help. A real dandy help."

Pete and I got up and went out into the corridor. We walked down to room 618.

Pete stopped a moment before he turned the doorknob. "You go on being the kind, understanding detective, Fred—if you want. My heart wouldn't be in it. I'll feel a lot more comfortable being mean."

Stuart was handcuffed to one of the steam pipes and he had a patrolman to keep an eye on him.

Pete walked close to Stuart and grinned. "Everybody around here's been treating you too gentle. I'm here to change that."

I unlocked Stuart's handcuffs. "Rub your wrists a little, Mr. Stuart. They'll feel a lot better." I put my hand on his shoulder. "And please take a chair. You must have been standing for hours and you're tired."

Stuart sat down and Pete leaned over him. His voice was a growl. "How do you feel now? Nice and comfortable?"

Stuart's lips trembled and he looked away.

"Mr. Stuart," I said. "All we ask of you is that you answer our questions in the best way you know. How soon after you plant those bombs do you make the phone call?"

Stuart shook his head. "I know nothing about those bombs."

Pete rubbed his knuckles. "Tell us what you were going to do with all that powder we found in your basement. And how about the pipes, the caps, and the watches?"

Stuart flushed slightly. "You had no right to search my mother's house. You had no right at all to go through my things."

Pete blew cigar smoke into his face and laughed.

The door opened and Captain Wilson came in. He stared at Stuart for ten seconds and then turned to us. "O'Brien died a few minutes ago."

Pete handcuffed Stuart to the steam pipe again and we went into the corridor. "Where's Eileen?" he asked. "At the hospital?"

Wilson shook his head. "There wasn't anything she could do there. I told her to go home about an hour ago."

He smiled tiredly. "I guess you two are elected to break the news."

He walked us to the elevators. "The lab boys have been putting things together. This time the bomb was a lot stronger. They figure at least three pipes were used."

Pete grunted. "I guess Stuart got tired of having his things go off without killing anybody."

Wilson pressed the elevator button. "Another thing. It wasn't a time device. It was rigged to go off when somebody lifted the package."

Eileen O'Brien opened the door of her ranch-style home. Her face was calm as she studied us and then she spoke softly. "It's all over, isn't it? Jerry's dead?"

I nodded.

She turned and walked away. Pete and I followed and closed the door.

We stood there awhile watching her stare out of the window and then Pete cleared his throat. "Maybe we'd better go, Fred."

Eileen turned. "No. I don't want to be alone now. I think it's better if somebody's with me." She smiled weakly. "I know this is hard on you too. You were Jerry's best friends."

Pete's hands played with the brim of his hat. "At least we got the guy who did it. That's something on the good side."

Eileen bent over the silver cigarette box on the cocktail table. "Has he confessed?"

"He'll get to it," I said. "We'll see to that."

Eileen sat down on the davenport. "Just what kind of a man is he?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I'm not his psychiatrist."

"He's weak," Pete said. "But he likes to feel important. He likes the idea of a whole city being scared."

Eileen was thoughtful for a moment. "Why don't you fix us all drinks, Pete? I think I could use one."

I listened to Pete moving about in the kitchen. "We got the right man, Eileen," I said softly. "We found everything we need to make it stick."

She smiled slightly. "That was luck, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "Some luck."

Pete came back with mixed drinks for Eileen and me and then opened a bottle of beer for himself. "There wasn't any beer in the refrigerator, so I went down into the basement and got some from the case. That was all right wasn't it, Eileen? Jerry always said to help myself if the refrigerator was empty."

He poured his beer carefully. "I guess Jerry really liked his job. The bomb work, I mean."

Eileen watched him. "Yes. I think so."

"While I was getting the beer, I noticed that he's got a sort of workshop down there. It looks like he did a lot of homework on those bombs." Pete smiled. "Didn't it worry you that he might blow up the house some time?"

Eileen shook her head. "He never brought any powder or dynamite home with him. He just studied the mechanics of the bombs."

Pete and I stayed another half hour and then we said good-bye.

Pete slipped behind the wheel of our car and turned on the ignition. "How long were they married, Fred?"

"Two years," I said. "You know that as well as I do."

He nodded. "Did you ever realize that most of the time you see people only when they're wearing their Sunday clothes? You never know what they got on when you're not around."

"They got along all right," I said. "If they didn't, they could always have gotten a divorce, couldn't they?"

Pete turned into the traffic at Eighth. "All kinds of diagrams lying around there. In the basement, I mean."

He stopped for a traffic light. "It's a terrible thing, Fred. But at least O'Brien was a considerate man. He once told me that he was insured up to the hilt. I think he said fifteen thousand."

I tossed my cigarette out the window. "We'd better get back to Stuart before he gets a chance to see a lawyer."

Stuart had had time to think, but his thoughts must have been bad ones. He flinched when Pete and I entered the room.

Pete took off his suitcoat and draped it over the back of a chair. "Well, here I am, Stuart. Have you been thinking about me?"

The movement of Stuart's head was jerky. "I tell you I know nothing at all about the bombings."

Pete put his face close to Stuart's. "You never got anything big like this before. Just a few cripples. Now you're big time. Everybody's going to read about you."

There was a flicker in Stuart's eyes.

"Mr. Stuart," I said. "All we ask is a simple statement from you. After that you may talk to the reporters if you want to. I'm sure you'll be on the front pages for weeks."

He licked his lips. "No," he said finally. "I have nothing to say."

"Mr. Stuart," I said patiently. "We didn't just pick you out of the crowd at random. We've seen you other times. Last week at the library, for instance."

Pete tapped him lightly on the shoulder three or four times. "You're a cop killer now, boy. You're going to fall down a lot of stairs if you don't cooperate."

"Mr. Stuart," I said. "We are not here to judge you. Perhaps you had some kind of legitimate grievance. Is that it?"

He almost spoke.

Pete broke the silence. "You know what's waiting for you, Stuart? You know what happens to killers in this state?"

Stuart's face went white.

I stepped back to where he couldn't see me. I looked at Pete and shook my head warningly. "Mr. Stuart," I said gently. "There is no danger of your going to the electric chair. I think we all realize that. You are a disturbed person and the state will recognize you as such. The worst that can happen to you is a few years in an institution for treatment."

We gave Stuart a full minute to think, but he shook his head stubbornly. "No. I refuse to say anything."

Pete moved closer and grabbed a handful of Stuart's shirt. He slapped him hard. This was the only way he could operate.

"Now, Pete," I said. "You know we can't allow anything like that."

Pete wiped the palm of his hand. "Why don't you go downstairs for a cup of coffee, Fred? Come back in fifteen minutes."

I shook my head. "No, Pete." I studied Stuart. "Your scrapbook is quite comprehensive. Apparently bombings were your favorite subject."

Pete grinned. "But that book of yours isn't complete, Stuart. Your picture isn't there."

"I really must admire you, Mr. Stuart," I said. "You were quite clever to escape detection all these years."

I thought I saw smugness in his eyes.

"You'd be surprised how many confessions we get," I said. "Right now there are three men downstairs who're clamoring to get their pictures in the papers. They want credit for this bombing and for all those that preceded it."

I believe it was indignation that made him flush.

"There's that, Mr. Stuart," I said softly. "And more. You know I won't always be here. Pete'll get to see you alone some time—and he gets what he's after the tough way. There's nothing I can do to prevent it unless you give me a statement."

I lit a cigarette and let Stuart think.

I could almost see his thoughts reflected in his face, the idea of someone else getting the publicity, the idea of being alone with Pete. I didn't know which fear was stronger.

Stuart rubbed his hands on his trousers and stared at the floor. Finally he sighed. "All right. I'll tell you everything."

Pete smiled tightly. "I'd especially like to hear about the last bomb."

Temper flared in Stuart's face. "I won't say a word as long as you're in the room." He pointed to me. "I'll talk only to him."

Pete looked at me and shrugged. He went out and sent the stenographer in.

When Stuart finished telling about the thirteenth explosion, I lit a fresh cigarette. "About this last one," I said. "The fourteenth. What made you use three pipes instead of one? Was it because you weren't satisfied with the effects of the other bombs?"

He glanced at me slyly. "Yes. That was it."

I let some smoke dribble through my nose. "This time you didn't use a timing device. You had the package primed to explode when it was lifted. I don't suppose you could possibly explain that, could you?"

He frowned for a moment. "I thought it would be more efficient that way."

When the stenographer returned with the typed transcript, Stuart read it carefully and signed all the copies.

And then the two of us were alone again.

I went to the window and opened it. I leaned out and breathed the fresh early evening air.

Stuart came beside me. "Suppose I said I was just lying when I confessed. I could do that, couldn't I?"

"Yes," I said. "I suppose you could."

"Two policemen killed," he said, relishing it. "My picture should be on the front page of every newspaper in the country."

I nodded.

A note of craftiness came into his face. "Suppose I denied setting off that last explosion? Suppose I admitted all the others, but denied that? Would my picture still be in all the papers?"

I pointed down below at the street. "I'll be damned. Did you ever see anything like that?"

He leaned over the ledge and squinted.

It took me a second. Stuart screamed all the way down.

Pete took a stool at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. "I learn something every day. I could have sworn Stuart wasn't the type to jump out of a window."

I shrugged. "Let's not cry about it. We got the confession and that's enough. He saved the state money."

Pete watched the counterman draw the coffee. "You know, Fred, all the time I was riding Stuart I had other ideas about that last explosion. I still have and I'm going to work on them—just to satisfy my curiosity."

"You're wasting your time, Pete."

"It's my time, Fred. I won't charge it to the department." He put cream in his coffee. "I'm not saying Stuart wasn't guilty. There's too much to show he was. I just got the feeling that maybe he wasn't guilty all the way down the line."

He stifled a yawn and glanced at the wall clock. "I'd like nothing better than to be in my little old apartment now with my shoes off, but I promised my folks I'd drop in for a couple of hours."

He sipped his coffee. "But I'll be snug in bed by ten tonight. You can bet on that."

It was nine o'clock when I got to Eileen's house. There was eagerness in her voice. "How did it go?"

"We got the confession," I said. "It covered all fourteen of the explosions."

Eileen smiled slowly. "You must have been persuasive."

I tossed my hat on the couch. "Stuart jumped out of the window a little while after he signed the confession. I was the only one there when it happened."

She was pleased for a moment and then she frowned. "Maybe it's not all over yet. There's Pete. I don't think he'll be satisfied. He's a prier. He's the type who likes to be sure of the answers."

I took her in my arms. "Don't worry about it, honey."

She met my eyes. "Oh?"

"I made another package," I said. "And let myself into Pete's apartment while he was gone. The first time his phone rings, he'll be blown to there and back."

At eleven o'clock I dialed Pete's number. Just to make sure.



Hitchcock on Shoplifting

Alfred Hitchcock was the guest of the owner of one of Chicago's largest department stores. A store detective, acting as a guide in showing Hitchcock through the establishment, boasted that he and his associates were responsible for the almost complete control of shoplifting.

Hitchcock, looking about at the predominately feminine crowd rushing to and from counters, said, "It is also possible that women might very well enjoy buying more than they would stealing."

Hitchcock on Spies

One of the Orient's most brilliant espionage agents once confided to Alfred Hitchcock, "Contrary to popular opinion, the best spies are not seductive, dark-haired women . . . thin, bony-faced men . . . or short, nearsighted, bald little men. The best spies are fat, jolly, ordinary-looking individuals. Now, no one ever suspects a fat, jolly person of having any insidious plans."

"No, they don't," said Hitchcock. "And what is more, I can carry secret material on my person without appearing unnaturally bulky."